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Introduction

MAKING AND UNMAKING SCULPTURE IN FIFTEENTH-CENTURY ITALY

Amy R. Bloch and Daniel M. Zolli

Around 1460, the artist Antonio Averlino (1400–69), better known to us by his adopted pseudonym Filarete (Greek for "lover of virtue"), produced a self-portrait medal, two copies of which survive (Fig. 1). The medal may be physically diminutive (7.9 × 6.7 cm), but its historical value is immense. Indeed, in this single object, it is possible to discern any number of themes that run, to varying degrees, through the period's sculpture. By producing a medal, Filarete knowingly took up a format that was then something of a novelty. Decades earlier, Filarete himself, as well as Pisanello (ca. 1394–1455), produced some of the first examples of the type.[1] Being made of bronze, moreover, the medal reflects a growing appetite, within certain cultural spheres, for a material prized because of its associations with antiquity. And it provides a link to Filarete's largest sculptural undertaking, the doors for St. Peter's in Rome (1433–45), which originally measured around twenty-two-feet tall and demonstrate the vastly different scales at which sculptors worked. To model and cast the medal, and earlier the doors, Filarete drew upon skills that he learned during his training as a goldsmith and work as a bronze caster; but just as significantly he signed the medal "architectus" (a profession that had, at the time of the medal's manufacture, come increasingly to preoccupy him), alerting us to another common reality of fifteenth-century practice: the hybrid career. And then there is the geographic itinerary that had led Filarete, a Florentine by birth, to the Sforza court in Milan, where he had been for about a decade before fashioning the medal. Earlier commissions in Rome, Rimini, Todi, Mantua, and Venice, among other cities, attest to a career spent, like many of Filarete's peers, relentlessly on the move.[2]

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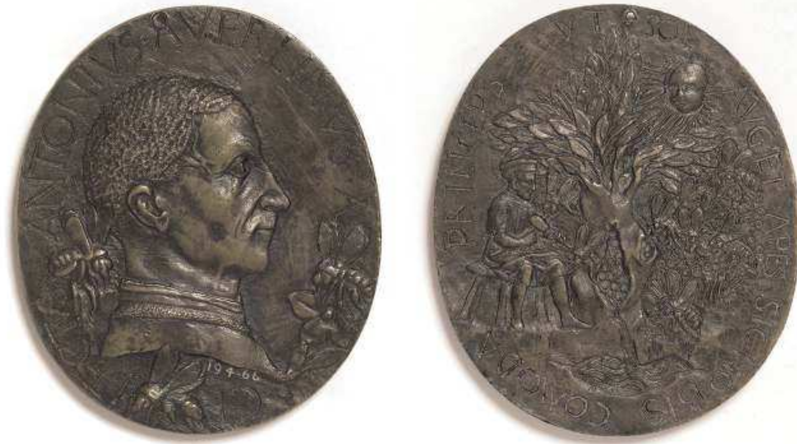

Figure 1 Antonio Averlino (Filarete), medal with self-portrait (obverse and reverse), ca. 1460, bronze, Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Photos: © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Most significant of all, perhaps, Filarete made himself, and less overtly his patron Duke Francesco Sforza, the very subjects of the medal. This occurs, first, in the commanding self-portrait in profile that he added to the medal's obverse – it, too, echoing classical precedents, in this case imperial Roman coinage; and, again, on the reverse, where the sculptor depicts himself "carving," with hammer and chisel, a beehive. The chisel's action has evidently agitated several bees, who hover around the tree's trunk. And it causes the hive's sweet contents to spill out and pool in the medal's foreground. In fashioning this medal, Filarete not only produced a sculpted object of himself sculpting, but he invested that act – through the inscription encircling the scene, inspired by the ancient poet Virgil and the philosopher Seneca – with metaphorical connotations. Just as the sun, at upper right, enables industrious and ingenious bees to make honey, its analogy suggests, so does the radiant support of the patron (here a prince) invigorate the talent of artists. It would be difficult to think of a more compelling testament to the growing social and intellectual ambitions of fifteenth-century Italian sculptors, and to their necessary entanglements with patrons, than this medal.[3]

We begin our volume with this object because it exemplifies the range of interpretive concerns that have animated scholarship on fifteenth-century sculpture: the emergence of the self-conscious artist, the decisive role of the patron, and the profound influence of antiquity on art's content, appearance, and form. But sculpture developed along numerous lines and according to a range of theories. The humanist Bartolomeo Fazio (d. 1457) might have measured modern sculptural accomplishment in relation to antiquity, whose glory, says Fazio, an artist like Donatello (1383/6–1464) approached and so challenged.[4] The humanist Cristoforo Landino described Donatello in the same terms, writing in 1481 that he was to be numbered "among the ancients."[5] Yet, in popular Florentine anecdotes, culled from that city's oral traditions, this same sculptor earned praise for his elemental cunning, his ingenuity, and his extraordinary aptitude for putting every form of deception to use – in life and work. That this century was defined by sweeping innovations in the plastic arts – arguably even more so than in painting and architecture – is well known. Less acknowledged, however, is the tremendous debate, and the lack of consensus, that drove such innovation. Fazio

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emphasized Donatello's reliance on ancient models, and in this he was perfectly justified. But it was equally the case that Donatello produced works, and used materials, that deviate sharply from classical precedent.[6]

The excitement of Quattrocento sculpture then – and one of the challenges attending its study – lies not only in its experimental nature, but also in the many, often polemical, positions to which it gave rise and, relatedly, in sculpture's almost inexhaustible variety. These differences are evident even among established masters and major theoretical voices. In his writings, Leon Battista Alberti (1404–72), for example, expressly eschews the historical dimension of art, choosing to focus on establishing rational protocols and rules to govern how paintings and sculptures should be made[7]; Lorenzo Ghiberti (ca. 1378–1455), in his art and his *Commentaries*, a three-book treatise he started compiling perhaps as early as the late 1420s but never completed, took a radically different path, binding sculpture inextricably to history. The Florentine chronicler Giovanni Cavalcanti (1381–ca. 1451), meanwhile, recognized the diverse creative inclinations of artists, but he ascribed them to stellar or heavenly influences.[8]

In undertaking the present anthology, our ambition was, in one sense, to give the variety of sculpture in fifteenth-century Italy its due. To this end, we solicited essays from nearly twenty scholars active in the field, aiming to include contributions on a wide range of materials and encouraging our authors to address themes they deem fundamental to the period and its stakes. Such a proposition has ensured, on the one hand, broad coverage and a plurality of approaches; and it has meant, on the other, that our volume offers readers a "state of the field" at our current disciplinary juncture, even if this has not been our primary goal. It should also be acknowledged that our intention has never been to create an alternative to Renaissance art history textbooks or surveys of sculpture, but rather to supplement them. This volume's essays – individually or collectively – are meant to deepen readers' understanding of Quattrocento sculpture, whether through enlarged analysis of objects or the presentation of different perspectives.

In another sense, our objective, in assembling this collection, has been to treat fifteenth-century Italian sculpture in as geographically inclusive a manner as possible: with essays on both traditional "centers" of art-historical scholarship (e.g., Florence, Venice, and Rome) and other, no less vital, arenas of sculptural production such as Milan and Naples. This was a tall order, bound to be unfulfilled given the variety and richness of sculptural production in this time and place. Bearing these thoughts in mind, we have elected, in this introduction, not to present a synopsis of the volume's contents, but instead to introduce the century's sculpture *tout court*. Readers will certainly find points of overlap between the remarks that follow and individual chapters, but it is our goal here to provide context and to expand topics and lines of argumentation that receive relatively less attention in the volume.

If this book can be said to have an overarching argument or thesis, it is that, in the realm of sculpture, the Quattrocento was a century defined by the focused interest in two related acts: *making* and what we call *unmaking*. *Making*, in the first place, refers to the facture of sculpture – how artists used materials and techniques, some invented in this century, to various visual, iconographic, and practical ends. Fifteenth-century sculptors worked in a stunning variety of media, and this volume's essays address numerous materials: gilded and ungilded bronze; polychromed and unpainted marble; polychromed wood; stucco; porphyry; glass and semiprecious stones; and glazed and unglazed terracotta. *Making* refers as well to the sculptural types (e.g., the portrait bust) and techniques (e.g., large-scale bronze casting) rediscovered or repopularized; and it alludes to the formulation

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of new compositional, figural, or spatial modes, such as the representation of fictive space through linear perspective. *Unmaking*, meanwhile, is a word the period's actors routinely used to describe art's destruction. Ghiberti, for example, notes that a fourteenth-century German goldsmith named Gusmin saw his ducal patron "unmake" (*disfare*) his works to fund other expenditures, acts, Ghiberti reports, that devastated Gusmin and drove him from the profession.[9] The transcripts of sacred plays specify that idols should be "unmade."[10] Sculptors considered carefully not only the creative act, but also the potential destruction of art, an issue of which they were especially aware given the burgeoning interest in history, where they sometimes found descriptions of iconoclasm. Moreover, under the influence of contemporary humanists' investigation of the ancient past – a past whose physical remnants were often lost or severely degraded – sculptors in the fifteenth century were increasingly attentive to the disappearance and significant modification of art, through the effects of either humans or nature, and to the ways such modifications might be explained or interpreted. And, since many sculptors trained as goldsmiths, they were well aware that many sculptures were often crafted from older objects that had been melted down. Several of this volume's contributions examine instances of sculpture being destroyed, broken, effaced, converted (from pagan to Christian), repurposed, or liquidated and physically transformed into new objects entirely. *Unmaking* also refers to the fact that representational norms, having been established (some might say invented) and repeated, were often consciously left aside by other sculptors who worked to develop new approaches.

Finally, when taken together, the two terms can be understood to highlight the ways the fifteenth century has sometimes been constructed – as a transition in the Vasarian narrative, from the Middle Ages to the High Renaissance – and our own interest, in this volume, in dismantling this notion and demonstrating that it stands on its own as an era of tremendous experimentation.

GOLDSMITHERY, TRAINING, WORKSHOPS, AND COLLABORATION

Perhaps more than any other practice, that of goldsmithery launched the careers of Quattrocento sculptors. The profession flourished up and down the Italian peninsula. In Milan, the century opened with activity by masters such as Beltramino de Zuttis, and toward its end the goldsmith and medalist Caradosso (ca. 1452–1527) was ascendant; in the Veneto and across northern Italy, generations of the Da Sesto family worked in towns large and small; communities of goldsmiths were active in the Abruzzo, most prominent among them Nicola da Guardiagrele (ca. 1390–ca. 1459), whose works often reflect the figural compositions in the bronze reliefs of Ghiberti's first Florence Baptistery doors and whose travels helped spread Florentine stylistic innovations (Fig. 2).[11] In Naples, Alfonso V of Aragon supported a thriving community of goldsmiths. For Alfonso, every object could theoretically be made of precious metals: in 1442, he had goldsmiths fashion gilded silver rods for sounding drums when he hunted with his dogs.[12] Guild books and other documentation reveal how many worked in the industry in each city. In Lucca, for example, forty-seven goldsmiths were active over the course of the fifteenth century; in Rome, there were around 130.[13] Goldsmithery was an international art: its practitioners traveled, carrying with them techniques, drawings, finished works, and, at times, a style – the "International Gothic." The goldsmiths working in Lucca came from Genoa, Siena, Piacenza, and Milan, as well as the nearby

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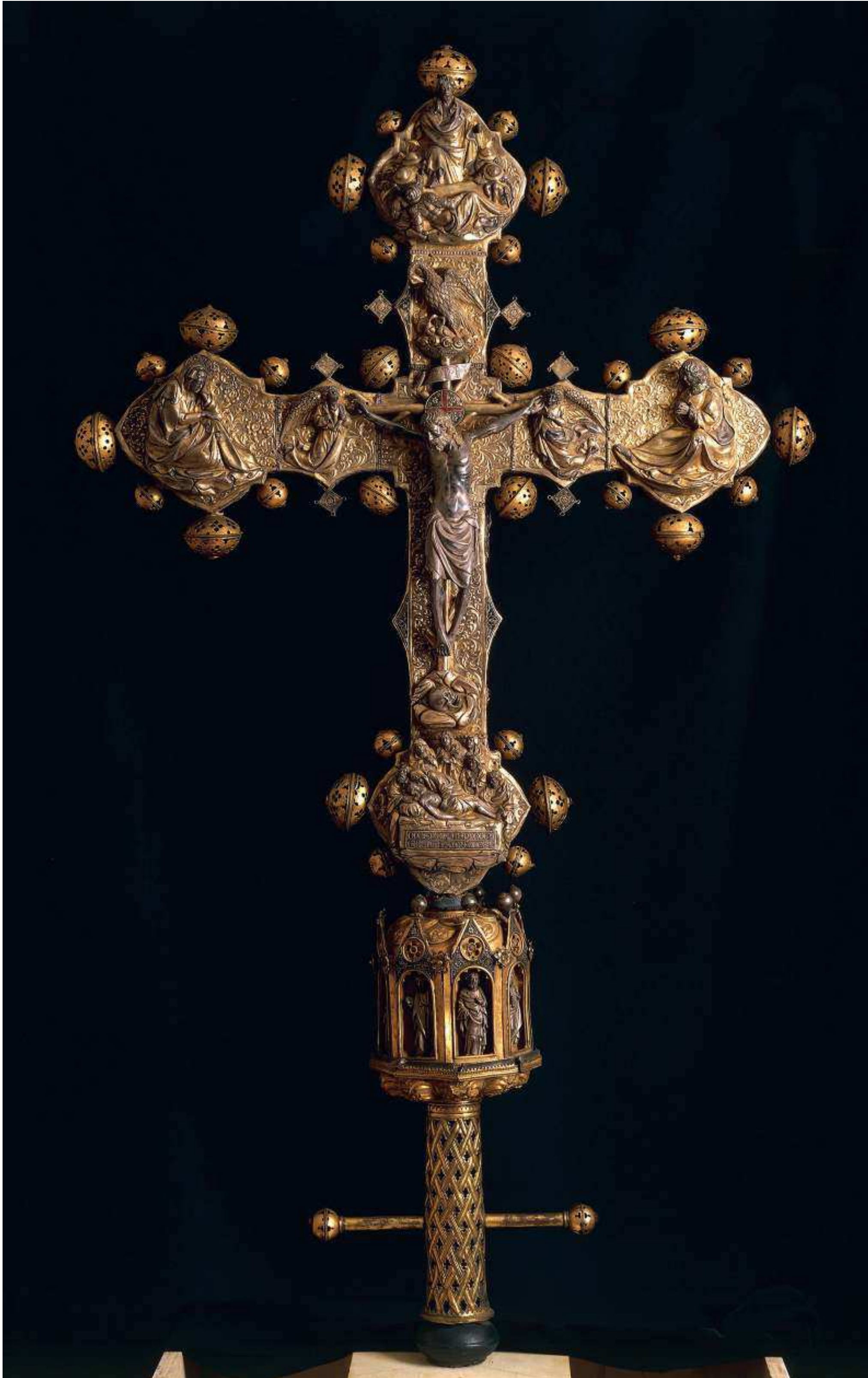

Figure 2 Nicola da Guardiagrele, processional cross of St. Maximus, 1434, silver, enamel, and copper, Museo Nazionale D'Abruzzo, L'Aquila. Photo: De Agostini Picture Library/A. De Gregorio/Bridgeman Images

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cities of Pisa, Fivizzano, Carrara, and Sarzana.[14] Those in Rome, who were often attracted to the city by papal patronage, hailed from all over Europe: not just Italy, but also Spain, Flanders, and Germany.

Many Quattrocento sculptors trained in the shops of goldsmiths.[15] Nowhere is this more clearly documented than in Florence, a mercantile city with exhaustive record-keeping routines. Filippo Brunelleschi (1377–1446), Donatello, Ghiberti, Michelozzo (1396–1472), and Luca della Robbia (1399/1400–82) all either apprenticed with goldsmiths or worked, early on, with precious metals; the latter three individuals practiced the art throughout their lives (Fig. 3). Many later Florentine sculptors – for example, Andrea del Verrocchio (1435–88) and Antonio del Pollaiuolo (ca. 1431–98) – similarly trained with goldsmiths before moving on to produce large-scale sculpture in varying media. One finds this pattern elsewhere. The Padua-based sculptor Andrea Briosco (1470–1532), called Riccio, learned goldsmithery from his father before specializing in bronze.[16] Although known today for their work in marble, the Lombards Antonio and Cristoforo Mantegazza first trained as goldsmiths, which deeply influenced their later undertakings: the marble reliefs they fashioned for the façade of the Certosa of Pavia (1470s–90s, although Cristoforo d. ca. 1482), for example, resemble ancient carved gems and cameos, objects goldsmiths often set into precious metal frames. In Parma, the goldsmith Gianfrancesco di Luca Enzola (ca. 1430–ca. 1513) gravitated toward bronze, eventually creating the first struck portrait medals. And Beltramino de Zuttis produced large-scale sculptures like the imposing, over life-sized gilded copper bust of God the Father (Fig. 4) for the Milan Cathedral.

Goldsmiths practiced, and taught to their apprentices, the art of *disegno*, a term signifying both the physical act of drawing and the invention and judgment used to produce a design.[17] So, too, did they produce a wide variety of objects – utilitarian (e.g., buttons, pens, and buckles), decorative (book covers), and ceremonial (processional crosses); and they employed a vast range of techniques, not only those utilized to fashion and decorate objects, but also chemical processes used to refine the substances with which they worked. They purified raw metals, mixed and tested alloys (pure silver and gold were used rarely), modeled soft materials like wax and clay, cast through the lost-wax technique, chiseled and smoothed surfaces, assembled parts into larger structures, incised and punched surfaces, and, finally, adorned them with, for example, gold, faceted and polished stones, and enamel.[18] To learn the art, one had to master techniques fundamental to many other types of sculpture, hence goldsmithery's utility and popularity among young artisans, no matter their particular artistic inclinations. For example, documents refer to the young Guido Mazzoni (ca. 1450–1518), known today for his electrifying, life-sized sculptural groups in painted terracotta (which were sometimes placed against painted backgrounds), as an *orafo* (goldsmith).[19] An apprenticeship in goldsmithery was also profitable for aspiring painters, since they often decorated the water-gilded surfaces of panel paintings with punchwork. The fundamental nature of training in goldsmithery assumes visual form in an illuminated miniature from northern Italy, which represents the diverse forms of expertise that underlay work in metal – modeling, casting, surface finishing, gilding – as well as the range of objects to which such expertise might be applied, not all of them sculptures (Fig. 5).

Goldsmithery was a living art that encouraged experimentation and invention – and it had been thus for centuries. The refinement of gold, for example, produced a black, silver-rich residue used, since antiquity, to make niello, which goldsmiths employed to create decorations on engraved metals (Fig. 6).[20] Just before 1400, goldsmiths invented *émail en ronde bosse*, a technique that involved coating irregular surfaces

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Figure 3 Michelozzo di Bartolomeo, *St. John the Baptist* from the silver altar of the Florence Baptistery, 1452, partially gilded silver, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Florence. Photo: Alfredo Dagli Orti/Art Resource, NY

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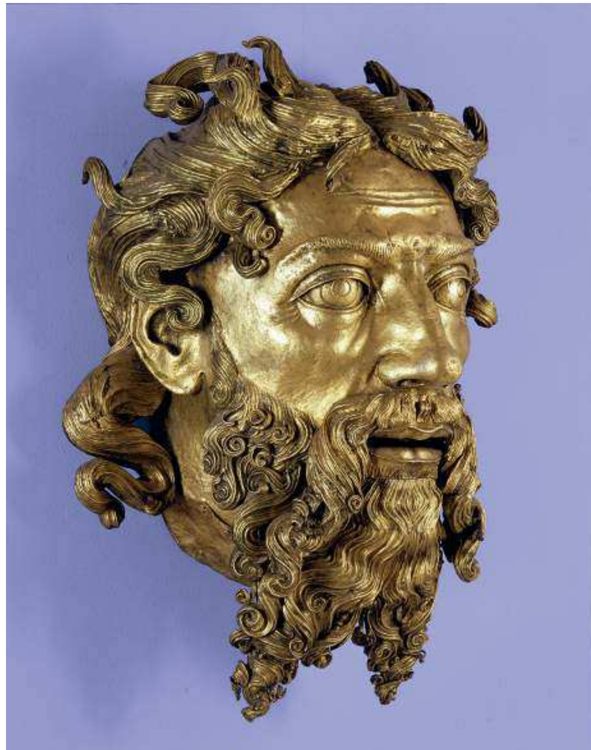

Figure 4 Beltramino de Zuttis, *God the Father*, 1425, gilded copper, Cathedral of Santa Maria Nascente, Milan. Photo: Scala/Art Resource, NY

completely in enamel, often white in color; the process has been tied to Luca della Robbia's invention, about forty years later, of tin-glazed terracotta.[21] It is broadly accepted, moreover, that the advent of printmaking, and particularly engraving, in Italy during the latter half of the fifteenth century resulted from the technical adaptations of goldsmiths, who had, since at least the twelfth century, used the burin and stylus to inscribe metal surfaces.[22]

In addition to teaching fundamental processes, the goldsmith's shop, like other *botteghe*, offered artistic parentage where family connections were lacking. Consider the family backgrounds of several sculptors who started out in goldsmithery: the fathers of Donatello and Luca della Robbia were tied to Florence's booming wool industry; Michelozzo's was a tailor; Antonio del Pollaiuolo's sold poultry; and Brunelleschi was the son of a notary. Verrocchio's father was a *fornaciaio* (a kiln operator), a member of the stone carvers and woodworkers' guild, and, eventually, a customs official. While these vocations allow that Verrocchio's introduction to clay and stone occurred under his father, it is perhaps more accurate to trace his beginnings as a sculptor, as in the examples already cited, to his tenure in a goldsmith's shop.[23] It was just as common, if not more, for sculptors to be born into their trade. Ghiberti learned goldsmithery from his adoptive father, Bartoluccio, and he trained his sons in the arts of goldsmithery and bronze casting. Careers in stonework were also passed down along family lines: in Florence, Desiderio da Settignano (1428/31–64), Benedetto da Maiano (1442–97) and his brothers Giuliano and Giovanni, and the Rossellino brothers had fathers in that trade; as did Bartolomeo Bon and the Lombardo brothers, Tullio and Antonio, in Venice. Domenico Gagini (ca. 1425–92) probably learned to carve stone from his father in Genoa before making his name in southern Italy; and Nanni di Banco was a third-generation stoneworker at the Florence Cathedral complex.[24] Entering the family business frequently affected decisively the type of work that one did, and it was not uncommon for sculptors to specialize in the same media as their fathers. The material repertoire of those whose entrée came through goldsmithery generally ranged more freely, perhaps because these individuals were less bound by concerns for continuity in a family firm. Moreover, some of the material flexibility, even intrepidness, of those who apprenticed with goldsmiths, perhaps derives from the experimental nature of work in precious metals, noted earlier.

Those who entered the sculptural trade from within enjoyed certain advantages. Take Ghiberti, for instance, whose victory in the competition for the Florence Baptistery's second set of bronze doors, in 1401–2, has often served as a parable for the early Renaissance: an upstart, in his early twenties, outshining the field of

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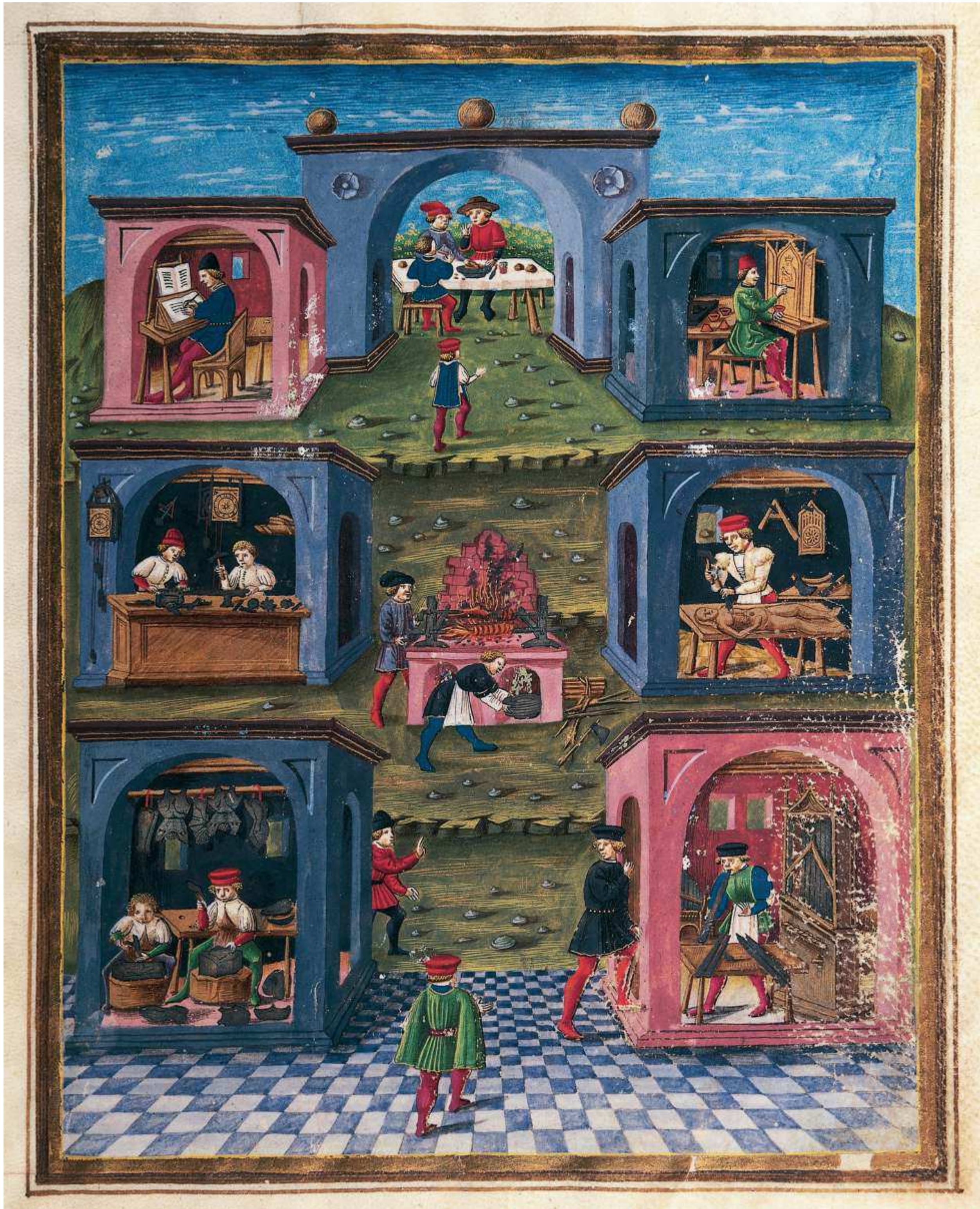

Figure 5 Northern Italian illuminator, *Craftsmen under the Influence of Mercury*, fifteenth century, from Leonardo Dati's *De sphaera mundi*, Ms. A.X.2.14=Lat. 209, 11r, Biblioteca Estense, Modena. Photo: © DeA Picture Library/Art Resource, NY

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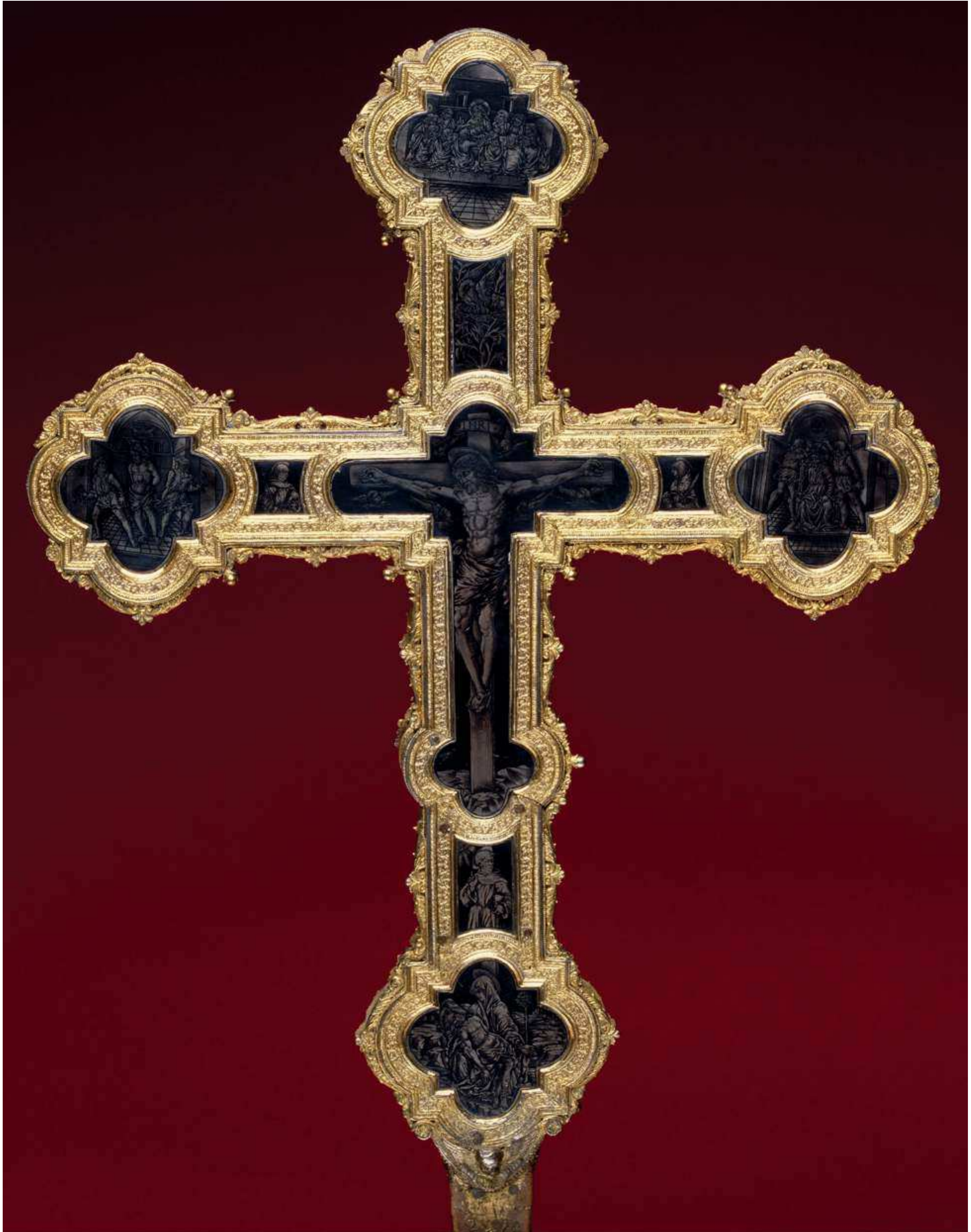

Figure 6 Processional cross (attributed to Baccio Baldini), ca. 1460–80, partly gilt silver, niello, and copper with traces of gilding, over wood, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Photo: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City

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